

Jonas

ERASMUS-LUTHER

MILESTONES OF THOUGHT

Discourse
on
Free
Will

Translated and
edited by
ERNST F. WINTER

DISCOURSE ON FREE
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INTRODUCTION

LUTHER repeatedly described *The Enslaved Will* (*De servo arbitrio*,

1525) and his *Catechism* (1529) as the best expressions of his thought. He had been aroused to write this fierce tract because of Erasmus' *On Free Will* (*De libero arbitrio*, 1524). And Erasmus, though originally sympathetic to the reform movement within Christendom—he himself relates a popular expression, “Erasmus laid the egg which Luther hatched”—again attacked the Lutheran version of reform. Erasmus was afraid of religious disturbances. He was also prompted by

themselves seem decidedly modern.

Well into the eighteenth century the Latin original of Erasmus was still being read. The Enlightenment had its picture of Erasmus, as did Romanticism and Liberalism in the nineteenth century. It is significant that the present Erasmus renaissance is revising all past pictures and, in particular, is attempting to show how orthodox, even Thomistic, Erasmus had been in his Christianity; that he is not just the “father of modernity” (cf. Bouyer and

Mesnard), but more complex; that he has much to say on current problems. Equally significant is the reevaluation of Luther as a truly religious and committed man, who is not simply responsible for the modern age, but who also produced both conservative and liberal consequences to his thought.

The following introductory remarks introduce the reader to an obviously complex subject. A mere sketch of the life, works, temperament, and some views of both protagonists suffices to show how

fascinatingly timely their topics have remained. The selected bibliography serves as a guide for further study.

Desiderius Erasmus was born in Rotterdam probably in 1466. He was the illegitimate son of a priest and a physician's daughter, a fact that depressed Erasmus all his life. Both parents died early. The boy who had never experienced family life craved for the rest of his days to be liked and appreciated. He was born into a time of turmoil and of partisanship. He

obtained a good education at the famous school of the Brethren of the Common Life at Deventer (1474-1484). They instilled in him their pious “devotio moderna,” a lay spirituality deeply affecting Northern Humanism. He became a monk and ordained priest at the Augustinian monastery at Steyn (1486-1493). His poor health and love for humanistic studies, plus dislike for the monks, gained him a temporary dispensation, which eventually Pope Leo X arranged in permanence.

Leaving the monastery—as it turned out later—for good, he turned first to the University of Paris (1495). The budding humanist scholar was disappointed. Scholastic subtleties only increased the Humanists' antipathies to Aristotle, dialectic, and Scholasticism. Erasmus, too, protested against systematic philosophy. Instead, classical philology, a virgin field of endeavor, attracted him. To place it in the service of religion was a sentiment strengthened on repeated visits to England, where he met devout

Humanists like Colet and St. Thomas More. Study, writing, good companionship, and collecting valuables filled much of his life thereafter. He discovered and edited Lorenzo Valla's critical *Annotations* to the Vulgate (1505). His study of Greek and trips to Italy enriched his horizon. *In Praise of Folly* (1511) was a biting satire on human nature. The Church did not escape unscathed. The new Bible translation and critical edition of the Greek text, the *Novum Instrumentum* (1516), marked progress in

higher textual criticism. And, although some great universities like Louvain, Oxford and Cambridge proscribed all his writings, many Renaissance churchmen actively sympathized with the “Erasmian reform” spirit.

The *95 Theses* a year thereafter (1517) ended this spirit’s chances for success. A more radical approach to reform had commenced. Soon a much broader popular response than Erasmus ever had had for his wit was to accompany one Martin Luther. Fourteen years younger

pious, was quite witty. The *Adagia* (1500) are popularized Humanism. In short, Erasmus felt proud to be a “humanist genius.” Luther, on the other hand, felt happiest when seriously concerned with the things of God. The Nominalist teaching of Gabriel Biel, a follower of William of Occam’s philosophy, deepened Luther’s problematic concern for the meaning of life, his own in particular. He could not find an answer in the classics, though he absorbed much learning. He turned

increasingly to the consolation of faith. Still young, he was given the important chair of theology at Wittenberg (1512). When preparing his lectures, he turned completely from humanistic learning and Scholastic theology to a biblical exegesis of his own inspiration. In 1515 he found his desperate queries answered in the Epistle to the Romans (1, 17), in the concept of “justification by faith.” Erasmus’ *New Testament* helped him gain further insights.

Erasmus at first affirmed much in Luther, but

increasingly objected to his “extremism and rough manners.” The years 1517 and 1520 brought serious estrangements. The humanist followers of Luther wished Erasmus on their side, especially Melanchthon, who remained an ardent admirer of Erasmus all his life. But Luther’s three fighting challenges to authority, as it existed in the Europe of his day, the *Address to the German Nobility*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* and *The Liberty of a Christian*, brought the

breach with Rome. In the same year a Roman bull, *Exsurge Domine* (1520), chastized Luther. He answered with the *Assertions*, which among other things, denied the free will. Erasmus hated to be drawn into this controversy and moved from Louvain to Basel (1521). The New Pope Adrian VI, a practical Netherlander, an old school friend of Erasmus, was genuinely interested in reform and wanted to see Erasmus do something, even come to Rome. Erasmus tried to shield his

“neutrality” by suggesting both ill health and his favorite idea of a truce. A jury of independent scholars (including himself) ought to be able to settle the commotion with due reason. Luther, from the other side, sarcastically counseled Erasmus not to get involved and to disturb his love of peace. Erasmus replied to him that he greatly feared Satan’s power might be deluding Luther. Finally, responding to both outward prodding and inner conviction (“At least *I* cannot be accused of abandoning the Gospel to

the passions of men”) Erasmus wrote in one sitting his *Diatribes seu collatio de libero arbitrio*, a classic treatise against Luther. It appeared September 1, 1524 in Basel. The Pope, the Emperor, and Henry VIII (who himself had received the title “Defender of Faith” for writing against Luther (1521), congratulated Erasmus. The world considered the little book a beautifully written and ingenious tract. The issue was joined. Despite detractions by the “heavenly prophets,” the

outbreak of bloody peasant uprisings, and personal problems, Luther soon finished his four-times-longer answer, *De servo arbitrio* (December, 1525). The answer was as unsystematic as Erasmus' piece, but powerful in its conviction and denial of the freedom of the will. Erasmus was stung. His peace was gone. Luther must be answered. The resulting two lengthy volumes, *Hyperaspistes Diatribae adversus servum arbitrium M. Lutheri* (1526, 1527), are more

careful than his earlier work. Luther is castigated as the destroyer of civil, religious, and cultural order and harmony. In a sense Erasmus offers a detailed explanation of Christian Humanism and humanistic theology, as he conceived both. But not even his conciliatory and pacific *On Restoring Concord in the Church* (1533), concluding with the admonition “tolerate each other,” was able to bridge the enmity. His common sense and uncomplicated tolerance could not satisfy the committed seeker for

religion. He wants to solve the issue theologically. For Erasmus Christianity is morality, a simplicity of life and of doctrine. He wants to resolve the problem philosophically. In current terminology, Erasmus displays an anthropological concern, but employs essentially theological tools, without being or ever wanting to be a theologian. Luther fashions his own theological tools, without much interest in systematic structure. Erasmus has deep pastoral concern. Luther desires the truth to shine forth and the whole

salvation, first to last, is God's. Both proceed from different vantage points. Erasmus dismisses both the excessive confidence in man's moral strength, held by the Pelagians, and what he believed to be St. Augustine's view, the excessive hopelessness of a final condemnation passed on man. He identified Luther with the latter. Erasmus calls Scripture to help in outlining his reasonable and conciliatory middle way, really a philosophical and pragmatic statement of man's essential freedom.

Luther interprets this to mean assigning free will to divine things, because his interest lies in practical implementation of a classical Christian paradox, which he thought solved. His solution is “faith alone sets us free.”

Consult the footnotes (especially 1/1; 111/2,3/10,11; V/8).

Erasmus tries to skirt the difficulties that Luther’s problematic mind discovers in much of the Church’s age old interpretation of this Christian paradox.

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CONTENTS

Part 1 ERASMUS: *The Free Will*

1. Preface: Man and Truth
2. Introduction: Objective
Criterion for Truth
3. Old Testament Proofs

Part One: ERASMUS

THE FREE WILL

1: A DIATRIBE OR SERMON CONCERNING FREE WILL

*Desiderius Erasmus of
Rotterdam*

PREFACE: MAN AND TRUTH

AMONG the many difficulties encountered in Holy Scripture —and there are many of them—none presents a more perplexed labyrinth than the problem of the freedom of the will.

cannot tolerate whatever differs from it. Whatever they read in Holy Scripture, they distort to serve the opinion to which they have once and for all enslaved themselves. Their case is like that of the young man who loves a girl so much that he fancies he sees her image everywhere. Or to use a better comparison: they are like those who in the heat of battle turn everything at hand, be it a pitcher or a plate, into a missile. Are people thus affected able to form an objective judgment? Or is it not rather the result of such

disputations that both contestants part spitting upon each other in contempt? There will always be many such people, the kind the Apostle Peter describes as, “the unlearned and the unstable,” such as “distort the Scriptures to their own destruction” (2 Peter 3,16).

3) Having an Open Mind

For these reasons then, I must confess that I have not yet formed a definite opinion on any of the numerous traditional views regarding the freedom of

the road to piety, we should continue to improve eagerly and forget what lies behind us; if we have become involved in sin, we should make every effort to extricate ourselves, to accept the remedy of penance, and to solicit the mercy of the Lord, without which neither the human will nor its striving is effective; for all evil let us consider ourselves responsible, but let us ascribe all good to Divine Benevolence alone, for to It we owe even what we are; and in all things must we believe that whatever

intrude upon these
concealed, even
superfluous questions with
irreligious curiosity,
namely, whether God's
foreknowledge is
contingent; whether our
will can contribute
anything to our eternal
salvation, or whether it
simply undergoes the
action of operative grace;
whether everything we do,
good or evil, is done out of
mere necessity, or whether
we are rather in a state of
passive acceptance. Some
things God wishes to
remain totally unknown to
us, such as the day of our

death and the day of the last judgment. “It is not for you to know the times or dates which the Father has fixed by his own power” (Acts 1,7). Or, “But of the day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Mark 13,32).

In other instances God wishes that we investigate by venerating Him in mystic silence. Therefore Holy Scripture contains numerous passages which have puzzled many, without ever anyone succeeding in completely

[Deuteronomy 30, 11-14 and Romans 10, 6-8.] This indeed must be learned well by all. The remaining is better committed to God. It is more devout to adore the unknown than to investigate the unexplorable. How many quarrels have arisen from investigations into the distinction of persons in the Holy Trinity, the manner of procession of the Holy Spirit, the virgin birth? What disturbances have been caused in the world by the fierce contentions concerning the conception of the virgin

*for “expedient,” rather
than the word
“prudential.”]*

The truth may be spoken but it does not serve everyone at all times and under all circumstances. If I were certain that a wrong decision or definition had been reached at a synod, it would be permissible but not expedient to speak the truth concerning it. Wicked men should not thus be offered an occasion to disdain the authority of the Fathers, especially when they have conscientiously and scrupulously made

philosophy.]

and that he rewards us for his good works wrought in us and punishes us for the evil deeds done in us. What a loophole the publication of this opinion would open to godlessness among innumerable people? In particular: mankind is lazy, indolent, malicious, and, in addition, incorrigibly prone to every impious outrage. How many weak ones would continue in their perpetual and laborious battle against their own flesh? What wicked fellow would henceforth try to

better his conduct? Who could love with all his heart a God who fires a hell with eternal pain, in order to punish there poor mankind for his own evil deeds, as if God enjoyed human distress? Most people would react as they are sketched above. People are universally ignorant and carnal-minded. They tend towards unbelief, wickedness and blasphemy. There is no sense in pouring oil upon the fire. Thus Paul, the prudent disburser of the divine word, frequently consults charity and prefers to

pursue what serves the neighbor, rather than what is permissible. Among the mature he speaks with the wisdom he possesses. But before the weak he displays no other knowledge but that of Jesus Christ, the crucified. [*1 Corinthians 2, 1-6.*] Holy Scripture knows how to adjust its language to our human condition. In it are passages where God is angry, grieved, indignant, furious; where he threatens and hates. Again in other places he has mercy, he regrets, he changes his intentions. This does not mean that

such changes really take place in the nature of God. These are rather modes of expression, benefitting our weak-mindedness and dullness. The same prudence should, I believe, adorn all who have taken up preaching the divine word. Some things can be noxious, because like wine for the feverish, they are not fitting. Hence such matters might be treated in discourses among the educated or also in theological schools, although it is not expedient even there I think unless done with caution.

2. INTRODUCTION: OBJECTIVE CRITERION FOR TRUTH

SINCE Luther recognizes no authority of any author, however approved, except that of the canonical books, I gladly accept this diminution of labor. Both among the Greeks and the Latins exist innumerable thinkers who deal explicitly or cursorily with the freedom of the will. It would have been a formidable task to gather all the quotations for and against free will; to explain

every passage as well as to refute it. This irksome exertion would have been wasted on Luther and his friends, particularly since they not only hold different opinions, but also contradict themselves extensively.

8) Authority of the Church Fathers

Nevertheless I wish to remind the reader, if he thinks we are holding the scale to Luther's, with our scriptural passages and firm reasoning, that he now visualize in addition the

Amobius, Hilary, Jerome and Augustine. I could also mention Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Durandus of Saint-Pourfain, John Capreolus, Gabriel Biel, Giles of Rome, Gregory of Rimini and Alexander of Hales.

[Origen (185-254) was one of the most prolific writers of the early Church. His interests in Platonism and in giving philosophy a recognized place in the creeds of the Church made him a controversial figure. Erasmus was particularly influenced by his scriptural

Yet, it is questionable whether it would not serve better than Wycliffe's. The former explains good and evil by the two natures in man, but in such a way that we owe the good acts to God on account of his creation, and because we can, despite the power of darkness, implore the creator for help. This can help us to sin less and to do good more readily. If everything reduces itself to pure necessity, where does Wycliffe leave us any room for prayer or our own striving?

To return to what I have

been saying before. Once the reader of my disputation recognizes that my fighting equipment is equal to that of the adversary, let him decide for himself, whether to attribute more to the decisions of all the many scholars, orthodox faithful, saints, martyrs, theologians of ancient and more recent times; of all the universities, as well as of the many councils, bishops and popes, or more to the private opinions of one or two men. I don't want to make the number of voices or the rank of the speakers

decide an issue, as is customary in human assemblies. I know it happens frequently that the better party is voted down by the majority. I know what the majority esteems is not always the best. I know, when investigating truth, there is no harm in adding to the diligence of one's predecessors. I admit that it is right that the sole authority of Holy Scripture surpasses the voices of all mortals.

But we are not involved in a controversy regarding Scripture. The same Scripture is being loved and

nobody, we would still not have an assured interpretation, since even scholars are toiling with obscurities; if to the successors of the Apostles, then they will object that many of them completely lacked the apostolic spirit. And yet, other things being equal, we can presume with greater probability that God communicated His Spirit to those who have been ordained, just as one considers it more probable that grace will flow to the baptized, rather than to the non-baptized.

Let us admit that the

doctrines were accompanied by miracles. But nowadays anybody demands faith from others by affirming his having the evangelical spirit. The apostles had to rout vipers, heal the sick, raise the dead, confer the gift of tongues by the laying on of hands. Only thus were they believed and hardly even thus, since they taught paradoxes. Nowadays certain people present even greater paradoxes

[Luther called his 1517 theses "theological paradoxa."]

known to me and who interrupt us by saying, "They were simply men," every time we advance an interpretation by an orthodox elder for the purpose of understanding a controversial passage. When we ask, what are the marks of a true scriptural interpretation, since both sides are represented only by human beings, their answer is "The mark of the Holy Spirit." If you ask why the Holy Spirit should have forsaken the side which is also distinguished by miracles, and be found rather amongst them, they

This then I want to reply to those who discard without hesitation the old interpretation of sacred books, and instead submit their own, as if an oracle had proclaimed it. Finally, even though Christ's Spirit might permit His people to be in error in an unimportant question on which man's salvation does not depend, no one could believe that this Spirit has deliberately overlooked error in His Church for 1300 years, and that He did not deem one of all the pious and saintly Church Fathers worthy enough to

By freedom of the will we understand in this connection the power of the human will whereby man can apply to or turn away from that which leads unto eternal salvation.

3: OLD TESTAMENT PROOFS SUPPORTING THE FREE WILL

*14) Ecclesiasticus 15:
Choose Good or Evil*

Those who take a free will for granted usually quote Ecclesiasticus 15, 14-18:

meritorious act. In those who remained faithful, their good will was so strengthened that it became henceforth impossible for them to choose evil. In man, will was so good and so free that even without additional grace it could have remained in a state of innocence, though not without the help of grace could it attain the blessedness of eternal life, as the Lord Jesus promised his people. Even if all this cannot be proved by clear scriptural testimony, it has been expounded with good

The Law of Nature, carved deeply into the minds of all, tells Scythians as well as Greeks that it is unjust to do to another what one does not wish to suffer himself. Without the help of Scripture and without the light of faith, philosophers have gained a knowledge of divine kindness and greatness by observing the created world. They have left us many moral precepts which bear an astounding resemblance to the precepts of the Gospels. We possess many of their sayings, encouraging virtue

and detesting turpitude. Thus it seems probable that they had a will tending to moral good, but incapable of eternal salvation, unless grace be added through faith.

The Law of Good Works, on the other hand, issues commands and sanctions them with punishment. It increases sin and causes death, not because it is evil, but because it requires good works which, without grace, we could not possibly perform.

The Law of Faith which, posing even more difficult commandments than the

law of works, makes what would be impossible, not only easy but also pleasant, as long as we are supported by abundant grace. Thus faith heals our reason which has suffered through sin, and charity helps our weakened will to act.

To a certain extent the Law of Good Works was expressed in Genesis 2,16, "From every tree of the garden you may eat; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you must not eat; for the day you eat of it, you must die." Furthermore, Moses has handed down a Law of

Good Works in Exodus 20, 13, and in Deuteronomy 5,17: “You shall not kill”; and “whoever strikes a man a mortal blow must be put to death” (Exodus 21,12). “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20,14). “If a man commits adultery with his neighbor’s wife, he shall be put to death” (Leviticus 20,10; cf. John 8,5). But what says the law of faith, which commands us to love our enemies, *[Matthew 5, 44]* and to carry our daily cross, *[Luke 9, 23]* and to value our life but little? *[Matthew 10, 39, Luke 14, 26, John 12, 25]*

and 1 John 2, 15] “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it pleased your father to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12,32, Matth. 5,3). In John 16,33: “Take courage, I have overcome the world.” And in Matthew 28,20: “Behold, I am with you all days, even unto the consummation of the world.” This law the Apostles illustrated when they themselves departed cheerfully from the Sanhedrin, though having just been scourged for the sake of the name of Jesus. *[Acts 5, 40 f]* Thus Paul in his Philippians 4,13 asserts:

But we owe salvation solely to God without whose grace the will of man could not be effectively free to achieve good. The strength of soul, with which man can pursue the good he knows and avoid all evil, is in itself a gift of the creator who could have made a frog instead of man.

Whoever agrees with Duns Scotus,

[Cf. chapter 2, footnote 1. Duns Scotus, known also as Doctor subtilis, became founder of Scotism, traditional philosophy of the Franciscan Order, and

they employ.

19) Freedom and Grace according to St. Augustine and the Reformers

Diametrically opposed is the view that all morally good deeds [without grace] are detestable in God's sight no less than criminal deeds such as murder and adultery, because they do not originate in faith nor in love of God. This judgment is obviously too severe. The fact remains that there have been philosophers who possessed some knowledge of God, and

grace which can eliminate his sin and make him once more pleasing to Himself. Thus a sinner aided by this second kind of grace, which we had called operative, is displeased with himself. Yet, though he has not abandoned the inclination to sin, he is capable of giving alms, can pray, practice pious exercises, listen to sermons, request pious people to intercede for him with God, and thus by means of these and other ethically good works, apply in a way for obtaining the ultimate grace.

The goodness of God does

not refuse to any mortals this second grace. The mercy of God offers everyone favorable opportunities for repentance. One needs only to attach the rest of one's own will to God's help, which merely invites to, but does not compel to betterment. Furthermore, one finds the opinion, that it is within our power to turn our will towards or away from grace—just as it is our pleasure to open or close our eyes against light. It is incompatible with the infinite love of God for man that a man's striving with

goal. The last three are supposedly one and the same grace, even though according to its operation in us, we call it by different names. Thus, the first excites, the second promotes and the third leads to the goal.

21) Views of Thomists, Carlstadt, and Luther

There are then those who are quite removed from Pelagius in ascribing more to grace and hardly anything to the free will, though not completely abolishing it. They deny

With this passage agrees also the Lord's saying to Moses: **"I have set before you life and death. Choose the good and follow me."**

[This appears to be a free rendition of Deuteronomy 30, 19.]

Could it be stated any more plainly? God shows what is good and what is evil. He offers as recompense death or life. He relinquishes to man the freedom of choice. It would be ridiculous to command one to make a choice, if he were incapable

The above agrees also with what the Lord says in Isaiah:

“If you be willing and harken to me, you shall eat the good things of the land. But if you will not, and will provoke me to wrath, the sword shall devour you” (Isaiah 1,19).

Assuming man has no will to do good, or even, as some assert, neither good nor evil, what is the meaning then of “if you be willing” and “if you will not”? It would be more fitting [for God] to say, “if I

assures with his message: "I have heard thy prayer, and I have seen thy tears, and behold I have healed thee," etc. And again in 2 Kings 12,10 Nathan tells David: "The sword shall never depart from thy house" etc. But no sooner has David said: "I have sinned against the Lord," Nathan says to David: "The Lord also hath taken away thy sin; thou shalt not die." As in these, so in other passages, it is improper to think of a changeable God. Yet, we cannot but realize that there dwells a flexible will in us. If necessity

guides it towards evil, how can sin be attributed to it? Or if it is guided by necessity towards good, why does God change from anger to mercy, since we deserve also in this case no requital?

4: NEW TESTAMENT PROOFS SUPPORTING THE FREE WILL

THUS far the discussion has centered on proofs taken from the Old Testament. Some people could dispute these, had they not all been of the kind of those that

were not abolished but received more probatory strength through the Gospels. Let us therefore turn to the books of the New Testament.

In the New Testament we meet first of all the place where Christ weeps over the destruction of Jerusalem. [*Matthew 23, 37.*]

Jerusalem, Jerusalem!
Thou who killest the
prophets, and stonest
those who are sent to
thee! How often would I
have gathered thy
children together, as a

necessity can earn merit.
Our Lord Jesus says
moreover,

“Rejoice and exult,
because your reward is
great in heaven” (Matth.
5,12).

What does the parable of
the laborers in the vineyard
tell us? Are there workers
who don't work? Each one
received contractually one
denarius as a kind of
remuneration for his work.
One hears this objection: a
reward is something God
owes us, because he has
pledged his will to us, in

invites all to participate in his eternal kingdom. You gave me to eat, you gave me to drink, you took me in, you clothed me and so on. Again those on his left hand he does not reproach with necessity, but with the willing omission of works: you have seen me hungry, here was an opportunity for a good work, but you did not give me to eat, etc.

The entire Gospel is filled with exhortations.

“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened” (Matth. 11,28), “watch” (Matth. 24,42), “pray” (Matth. 5,44), “ask . . . seek

. . . knock” (Matth. 7,7).
“take heed . . . beware”
(Mark 8,15). What is the
meaning of these many
parables concerning the
word of God which “we
should preserve” (Matth.
13,1-8)? Concerning the
bridegroom whom we
should hasten to meet
(Matth. 25,1-13);
concerning the thief
coming at night, digging for
treasures (Matth. 24,43; 1
Thessalonians 5,2);
concerning the house
which must be built on rock
(Matth. 7,24). Of course,
these parables are to spur
us to exertion, diligence

“O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?” (Mark 9,18).

“Serpents, brood of vipers, how are you to escape the judgment of hell?” (Matth. 23,33).

The Lord speaks,

“Therefore, by their fruits you will know them” (Matth. 7,20).

“Fruits” mean to him works, and these he

the freedom of the will. Thus we meet above all a passage in the Epistle to the Romans: “Dost thou despise the riches of his goodness and patience and long-suffering? Dost thou not know that the greatness of God is meant to lead thee to repentance?” (Romans 2,4). How could the disdain of a commandment be imputed, if there is no free will? And how could God invite us to do penance, when he has caused impenitence? And how could a condemnation be justified, when the judge himself has compelled the

will render to every man according to his works” (Romans 2,5). The reference here is to a just judgment of God and to works which deserve punishment. If God ascribes to us only his own good works which he performs through us, and we thus earn glory, honor and immortality, then his goodness appears plausible. Although even in such a case the Apostle adds, “life eternal indeed he will give to those who by patience in good works seek glory and honor and immortality” (Romans 2,7).

But how could it be justified that “wrath and indignation . . . tribulation and anguish” (Romans 12,8-9) shall be visited upon the transgressor, if he is doing nothing freely, but everything through necessity?

26) Running the Race

Would not already the Pauline parable of the runner, the prize and the crown of victory be untenable, if nothing were attributed to our striving? In 1 Corinthians 9,24 we read: “Do you not know

endeavor will deprive one of the prize. This is completely different where everything happens through necessity. Also: “And again, one who enters a contest is not crowned unless he has competed according to the rules” (2 Timothy 2,5). And [two verses] before: “Conduct thyself in work as a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 2,3). The industrious husbandman is mentioned (2 Timothy 2,6). The competitor obtains a prize, the soldier his reward, the countryman his harvest. The same: “I have

opponents that this is a mode of expression. They also must permit us to employ occasionally figurative usage of words. But it is impudent for them to interpret “he makes himself holy” to mean “he is made holy by God, whether he likes it or not.”

“Let us lay aside the works of darkness”
(Romans 13,12),

“Strip off the old man with his deeds”
(Colossians 3,9),

exclaims Paul. How can

we be commanded to lay aside something, if we are incapable? The same:

“To wish is within my power, but I do not find the strength to accomplish what is good” (Romans 7,18).

Paul obviously admits here that it is in the power of man to want to do good.

28) Virtuous Endeavors Unite with Divine Grace

Now the will to do good works is in itself a good work. Otherwise an evil will

passage admonishing Timothy: “Do not neglect the grace granted thee” (1 Timothy 4,14). This declares that it is in our power to turn away from offered grace. The same in another passage: “His grace in me has not been fruitless” (1 Corinthians 15,10). The Apostle informs us that he has not left unused divine grace. How could he assert this, if he had done nothing? “Do you according to your part strive diligently to supply your faith with virtue” (2 Peter 1,5), and so on. And a little further on:

“Therefore, brethren, strive even more by good works to make your calling and election sure!” (2 Peter 1,10). Here the Apostle wants our virtuous endeavors to unite with divine grace, in order to reach perfection gradually through righteous deeds.

But I fear it could seem to some that this is an immoderate heaping together of passages encountered everywhere in Scripture. When Paul writes: “All Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproaching, for

propositions as heretical (June 15, 1520), and wrote in answer the Assertio. See chapter 1, footnote 3. Erasmus wrote much of his Diatribe against this Article 36 of the Assertio.]

This article must be revoked, I have expressed it improperly, when I said that the free will, before obtaining grace, is really an empty name. I should have said straightforwardly that the free will is really a fiction and a label without reality, because it is in no man's power to plan any

5: APPARENT PROOFS AGAINST THE FREE WILL

IT IS now time to consider from another angle some scriptural testimony that seems completely to contradict the freedom of the will. Such we meet, of course, here and there in Holy Scripture. However, two passages are especially important and more obvious than the others, and both are dealt with by the Apostle Paul in such a manner that at first one has the impression he thinks

spared you” (Exodus 9,16), rather than “created you.” Otherwise the Pharaoh could not be called godless, since “God saw that all he had made was very good” (Genesis 1,31). In reality Pharaoh was created with a will enabling him to move in both directions. He has turned evil on his own account, since he preferred to follow his own inclination, rather than obey God's commandments.

32) God Uses Free Will

This malice of Pharaoh

33) *God's Foreknowledge*

The knotty point how God's foreknowledge is compatible with our free will has often been amplified. But in my opinion Lorenzo Valla [*This is the other of Erasmus' two references to Valla. Cf. ch. II, footnote 3.*] has been most successful at it: Foreknowledge does not cause what is to take place. Even we know many things which will be happening. They will not happen because we know them, but vice versa. An eclipse of the

does not hold true in most cases, and it happens more frequently among evil than good people. The Jews crucified the Lord with the purpose of removing him completely. This wicked plan God turned to the honor of his son, and to the welfare of the entire world. That centurion Cornelius who competed for God's favor with good works, obtained what he wished for. [*Acts 10.*] Paul, too, finished the race and won the victory crown for which he competed. [*2 Timothy 4, 7f.*]

natural effect of all secondary causes into its opposite. He could effect in a natural manner that something becomes cool and moist through fire, hard and dry through water, shaded by the sun, that streams will not run and rocks will flow, that poison becomes nourishment and food poison. Thus the three youths in the Babylonian furnace remained uninjured, while the Chaldeans were destroyed by its heat. *[Daniel 3, 19 ff.]* When God performs such, we speak of a miracle. In

gainsayeth his maker, a
shard of the earthen pots!
Shall the clay say to him
that fashioned it: what
art thou making, and thy
work is without hands?

And even more explicitly in
Jeremiah 18,6:

Can't I do with you as this
potter, O house of Israel?
Behold, as clay is in the
hand of the potter, so are
you in my hand.

These passages are to prove
more in Paul, than they
intended to prove in the
original writings of the

Shall the axe boast itself against him that cutteth with it? Or shall the saw exalt itself against him by whom it was drawn? As if a rod should lift itself up against him that lifteth it up, and a staff exalt itself, which is but wood.

These words are directed against a godless king whose hardness God uses to chastise his people. He ascribed to his own wisdom and strength that which could only happen because God permitted it, although he was only a tool of divine wrath. Yes, he was a tool,

It is also not difficult to refute the proof which Origen cites from Ezekiel 36,26: "I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and will give you a heart of flesh." This is a metaphor. Similarly a teacher could say to a pupil with deficient Latin, "I'll drive that barbaric manner of speech out of you yet, and will drum classical Latin into you." Nonetheless [the teacher] would have to demand industriousness of his student, even while the latter could not learn to speak differently, except

The canonical books of Holy Scripture originated under his inspiration. Their inviolable sublimity is acknowledged and affirmed by both parties in the dispute. Therefore one must find an interpretation which resolves this seeming contradiction.

Whoever wants to abolish the freedom of the will, will be interpreting “Stretch forth thy hand to which thou wilt” (Ecclesiasticus 15,17) to signify that grace will stretch out its hand according to its will. “Make yourself a new heart” (Ezekiel 18,31) signifies

orthodox Church Fathers or Church Councils, I would soon be interrupted with the objection that these are only human.

[Recall the argument of Erasmus, the Humanist, concerning “human” in chapter 1.]

And I am not permitted to say against the most violent and distorted interpretation of Luther that he too is only human? Of course, the opponent would be victorious, were it permissible to interpret Scripture according to his

6: LUTHER'S PROOFS AGAINST THE FREE WILL

WE WANT to examine

[Here the reader will find a strong reliance on the Bishop of Rochester, Fisher's treatment. Cf. chapter 1, footnote 4.]

now how valid are Martin Luther's [arguments] with which he wishes to topple the freedom of the will from its throne.

42) Weakness of Human Nature

He quotes a passage from Genesis: “My spirit shall not remain in man forever, since he is flesh” (Genesis 6,3). Scripture understands by “flesh” here not simply a godless passion, as Paul sometimes uses it when commanding the mortification of the flesh, [*Romans 8, 13*] but rather the weakness of our nature inclined towards sin, as Paul again implies when he calls the Corinthians carnal, as little children in Christ, with no capacity yet for solid doctrines. [*1 Corinthians 3, 1 ff.*]

God's gentleness rather than severity. "Flesh" refers to man, by nature weak and inclined to evil. In turn God's wrath is called "spirit."

Accordingly, God affirms he does not want to retain man for eternal punishment, but rather out of mercy [he wants] to punish him already here [on earth]. This utterance refers not to all mankind, but only to the men of those days, terribly corrupted by abominable vices. It states explicitly "these men." God did not just refer to all men of those days, because

does not follow from this that before the reception of sanctifying grace man cannot prepare himself with the help of God and morally good works for the favor of divine grace. We read of the centurion Cornelius, who was not yet baptized nor filled with the Holy Spirit: “Thy prayers and thy alms have gone up and have been remembered in the sight of God” (Acts 10,4). If all works done before the reception of the highest grace were evil, is it then evil works that must gain God’s favor for us?

signifies divine wrath, and “flesh” the natural weakness of man, which has no power against God, and “flower” the vainglory resulting from good luck in material transactions. The Jews prided themselves in their temple, their circumcision, their sacrifice, [*Romans 2, 17 ff.*] and the Greeks prided themselves in their wisdom. [*1 Corinthians 1, 22.*] Since, however, the wrath of God has manifested itself in the Gospel, all this pride and haughtiness has come to naught.

But man is not entirely flesh. There are, too, the soul and the spirit by which we strive towards the honorable. This part of the soul we call reason, or *iptioviov*, i.e., the directive faculty. Or should one presume that philosophers did not strive for the honorable, though they taught it to be a thousand times better to suffer death than commit an infamous action, even if we could know beforehand that men would not notice and God would forgive it? But fallen nature judges often wrongly, as the Lord says,

Spirit. This is the burden of the quotes from Luke and Paul.]

It was just such an erroneous judgment when the disciples, desiring revenge, appealed to the story of Elias requesting heavenly fire to consume two leaders with their fifty men. *[Luke 9, 54.]* Even in good men the human spirit is different from God's Spirit, as Paul says: "The Spirit himself gives testimony to our spirit that we are sons of God" (Romans 8,16). If someone wants to contend that even

from the spiritual who judges everything rightly. [*1 Corinthians 2, 14 ff.*] And on another occasion he speaks again of a new creature in Christ. [*2 Corinthians 5, 17.*] If the entire man, even the one reborn through faith, were nothing else but flesh,

[This is not precisely what Luther would say, but a typical example of Renaissance liking for exaggeration. Though Erasmus decries this, he, too, falls prey to it at times.]

These and many other passages from the Proverbs support the acceptance of a free will.

Now, [Luther] quotes from the same chapter: “The Lord hath made all things for himself; the wicked also for the evil day” (Proverbs 16,4). [I answer:] God has created nothing evil by its nature. Nevertheless in his unfathomable wisdom he turns all things, even evil, to our advantage and to his glory. Even Lucifer was not created as the evil one, but rather, since his voluntary defection, God set him aside for eternal

punishment, in order to train the pious ones by his malice, and to punish the godless.

It does not become any more difficult when [Luther] quotes: "As the divisions of waters, so the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord" (Proverbs 21,1). [I say:] The one who guides does not necessarily force.

Nonetheless, as mentioned before, nobody denies that God could forcefully influence the thinking capacity of man, expel his original intentions and inculcate another, yes, even

deprive him of his intellect. But this does not change the fact that normally speaking our wills are free. If that is Solomon's opinion which Luther here interprets, namely that all hearts are in the hand of the Lord, why does he proclaim it to be something special with the heart of a king? This passage agrees even more so with what we read in Job 34,30: "Who maketh a man that is a hypocrite to reign for the sons of the people?" The same in Isaias 3,4: "And I will give children to be their princes, and the effeminate

evil, it would be wrong to form a generalization from such a special case.

Such proofs as Luther assembles then from the Proverbs could be gathered in huge numbers. But this would serve more their accumulation than their victory. Rhetoricians generally throw such arguments about them. Most of the time these can be applied conveniently to an interpretation favorable to free will, or to one against it.

47) Nothing without Christ

Luther considers Christ's saying in John 15,5: "Without me you can do nothing," just as accurate a javelin as the one Achilles used. In my opinion it is possible to respond in more than one way. First, "unable to do" usually means to be unable to reach what one strives for. This does not exclude the possibility of the striver proceeding in some way just the same. In this sense it is completely correct that we can do nothing without Christ. He speaks of the evangelical fruit which can be found only among those

who abide in the life on the vine, i.e. in Jesus Christ. Paul uses this mode of speaking when he says: “So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the growth” (1 Corinthians 3,7). That which is considered of little moment and is of no value is called “nothing.” The same: “[If I] do not have charity, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13,2). Followed by: “. . . it profits me nothing” (1 Corinthians 13,3), and again: “He calls things that are not as though they were” (Romans 4,17). Once

7: POSTSCRIPT ON APPARENT PROOFS AGAINST THE FREE WILL

48) *Reasonable
Interpretation of
Additional Passages*

[This refers to the passage on grace (John 3, 27), God speaking through men (Matthew 10, 20), the pulling power of grace (John 6, 44), thinking in God, but living in man (2 Corinthians 3, 5), and the origin of all good to be found in God (1

sermons. Not everyone should expect that, because the Spirit once inspired uncouth disciples, he too would be able to preach as if he had been given the gift of tongues. This may have happened once, nonetheless [the recipient] had to conform his will to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and acted together with him. This is obviously the duty of the free will. Or should we assume that God has spoken to us through the mouth of the Apostles, as he did with Balaam through the mouth of a donkey? [*Numbers 22, 23*]

In the same way is to be understood what John says: “No one comes to the Father but through me” (John 14,6). As the father glorifies the son, and the son the father, so the father draws [us humans] to the son, and the son to the father. Yet we are drawn in such a way that we soon run willingly. Thus we read: “Draw me: we will run after thee” (Canticles 1,3).

In the Pauline letters there are also passages which seem to destroy completely any influence of the free will. “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to

think anything, as from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God” (2 Corinthians 3,5). One can save the free will in two ways here.

First, several orthodox [Church] Fathers distinguished three steps in human action: (1) thinking, (2) willing and (3) doing. In the first and third steps they attributed no operation to the free will. Grace alone causes our Spirit to think good things; by grace alone is he guided to carry out the thought. But in the middle step, i.e., the willingness, both grace

The same song is sung in James 1,17: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above,” and Paul in Ephesians 1,11: “Him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.” These words aim at this that we should not arrogate anything to us, but attribute everything to the grace of God who has called us while we turned away from him, has cleansed us through faith, and who has also granted that our will can cooperate with his grace, although the latter by itself would be completely sufficient and in

no need of any help coming from the human will.

49) To Rule and to Effect

The passage in Philippians 2,13, “For it is God who of his own good pleasure works in you both the will and the performance,” does not exclude the free will. If you relate “of his good pleasure” to man, as Ambrose of Milan does, you'll understand that the good will cooperates with the effective grace. Just before (Philippians 2,12) we read: “Work out your salvation with fear and

trembling.” One can conclude from this that both God works in us, and that our will and effort strive solicitously with God. Nobody should have to reject this interpretation, because, as stated, immediately preceding is the passage “work out your salvation”—*pydtot*, which signifies more correctly “to toil,” than the word *Inpytir*, which is attributed to God, God being *Ivtpryw*, the one who effects and rules. But *ivipyel* refers to that which effects and impels. But even granted that both ruling and effecting mean

the same, this passage teaches us clearly that both God and man work.

What could man effect if our will were the same for God as the clay for the potter? “For it is not you who are speaking, but the spirit of your father who speaks through you” (Matthew 10,20). [*Cf. Erasmus, Section 48.*] This was said to the Apostles. Nevertheless we read in the Acts: “Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them” (Acts 4,8). How could the two contradictory statements be reconciled, according to which not

had done nothing, but he wanted to avoid the appearance of having attributed to his own strength what he had accomplished with the help of divine grace. The correction aimed at the suspicion of insolence and not at the possibility of cooperation in action.

God does not want man to attribute everything to himself, not even when he merits it. “When you have done everything that was commanded you, say “we are unprofitable servants: we have done what it was our duty to do” (Luke

Thus, he is not saying: “The Lord will judge you unworthy of grace, unprofitable servants, after you have done everything,” but rather says: “You say, we are unprofitable servants” (Luke 17,10). Paul who worked more than all the rest calls himself the least among the Apostles and unworthy to be called Apostle. [*1 Corinthians 15, 9*]

Similarly: “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father’s leave” (Matthew

10,29). First we must bear in mind what the Lord is discussing. He does not wish to teach the so-called forced necessity of all happenings. His example aims rather at taking from his disciples their fear of men. They should realize that they stand under God's protection, and that no man can harm them without his permission. This he will only do if it furthers them and the gospel. Paul says: "Is it for the oxen that God has care?" (1 Corinthians 9,9). Obviously the subsequent remarks of the Evangelist

originates man's ability to unite his striving to God's grace. This is what Paul means, when he says: "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15,10). He recognizes the author. But when you hear, "His grace has not been fruitless" (ibid.), then you recognize the human will, whose striving cooperates with divine help. The same is indicated when it says: "Not I, but the grace of God with me" (ibid.). For in Greek it is *jvv ifutl*.

And the Hebrew prophet of wisdom wished that divine wisdom assist him;

standing at his side and working with him. *[Wisdom 9, 10.]* She assists as a moderator and helper, like an architect supporting his assistant, ordering what is to be done, showing the correct method. If he commences to do something wrongly, she will recall him, and as soon as he fails, she hastens to his aid. The work is ascribed to the architect, without whose help nothing could have been accomplished. Nevertheless nobody would say, that helpers and apprentices have no share

in the work whatsoever. What the architect is for the apprentice, grace is for our will.

Therefore Paul says. “In like manner the Spirit also helps our weakness” (Romans 8,26). One does not call another weak who can do nothing, but one whose strength is insufficient for completing his undertaking. Nor is he called a helper who does everything alone. All Scripture exclaims: help, aid, assistance and support. But who could be designated as helper unless he helped one doing

something? The potter does not “help” the clay in the forming of a vessel, nor the carpenter his axe in the making of a bench.

50) Free Will and Good Works Made Possible through Grace

We oppose those who conclude like this: “Man is unable to accomplish anything unless God’s grace helps him. Therefore there are no good works of man.” We propose the rather more acceptable conclusion: Man is able to accomplish all things, if

God's grace aids him. Therefore it is possible that all works of man be good. As many passages as there are in Holy Scripture mentioning [God's] help, as many are there establishing the freedom of the will. These passages are innumerable. I would have won already, if it depended on the mere number of proofs.

8: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

51) Need for a Moderate Opinion

read for his own purpose. Whoever pondered the great religious indifference of man and the great danger of despairing of salvation, has, while trying to avert this calamity, succumbed unsuspectingly to another danger, and has ascribed too much to the free will. The others instead— who considered how enormously dangerous for true piety the trust of man in his own prowess and merits can be, and how unbearable the arrogance of certain persons is who boast of their good works and sell them to others

Christian that man depend completely on the will of God when he places his entire trust and all his hopes in his promises; when he, conscious of his own wretchedness, admires and loves his immense mercy which he gives us plentifully without charge; when he, furthermore, subjects himself completely to his will, no matter whether he wants to save or destroy him; when he accepts no praise whatsoever for his good works, and rather ascribes all glory to His grace, thinking that man is

reward to those who have trust in him; whereby, consequently, man has the duty to beg God assiduously for imparting and augmenting his Spirit in us, to thank him for every success and to adore in all cases God's omnipotence, to admire everywhere his wisdom, and to love everywhere his goodness.

These utterances are also very praiseworthy to me, because they agree with Holy Scripture. They conform to the creed of those who died once and for all to this world,

through their baptism have been buried with Christ, and after the mortification of the flesh live henceforth with the Spirit of Jesus, into whose body they have been ingrafted, through faith. [*Meant is the Mystical Body of Christ, Cf. Romans 6, 4.*] This is incontestably a pious and captivating conception, which takes from us every conceit, which transfers all glory and confidence to Christ, which expels from us the fear of men and demons, and which, though making us distrustful of our human potentialities,

consistent who exaggerate God's mercy towards the pious in such a way as to permit him to be almost cruel against the others.

A goodness which imputes to us its excellence might possibly be tolerable to a pious soul. But it is difficult to explain how it is compatible with justice (not to speak with mercy), to condemn the others, in whom God did not deign to cause good, to eternal tortures, although on their own they could not possibly effect any good, since they either possessed no free will, or only one good for

had furnished with machines, troops, money and all supplies aplenty for war, while another, whom he had thrown into war without armaments, he ordered put to death on account of the war's unhappy ending? Before dying, could he not say with justice to the king: why do you punish me for what happened through your fault? If you had equipped me similarly, I would have won too. Again, if a lord emancipates an undeserving servant, he can answer the remaining grumbling servants: You

servant justly consider the lord insane and cruel, if he had him flogged to death because he had not done that which was not in his power?

*55) Reservations
Concerning Justification
by Faith*

[Let us continue:] In this affair they greatly exalt faith and love of God. We hold these equally dear. We are convinced that the life of Christians is so contaminated with wickedness, stemming from nothing else but from

the coldness and drowsiness of our faith which is a superficial belief in words, while, according to Paul, he is justified who within his heart believes. I do not especially want to quarrel with those who attribute everything to faith as the fountainhead, although it seems to me that faith and love, and love and faith come about and nurture each other mutually. Certainly faith is nurtured by love, as the flame in a lamp is nurtured by the oil. For we have greater faith in him whom we love dearly. There is no

doing good. Pelagius, who was concerned about God's justice, attributed more to free will than to necessity. Not too distant from this position are the [Scotists] who ascribe to human will at least the ability to earn with natural powers through ethically good works that highest grace, by which we are justified. They seem to me to be inviting man to strive by affirming good hope in obtaining salvation. Also Cornelius by giving alms and by praying [*Acts 10, 4 f.*] has merited being instructed by Peter, like

Philip instructed the [Ethiopian] eunuch. [*Acts 8, 26 ff.*] When Augustine searched zealously for Christ in the Epistles of Paul, he deserved finding him. Here we could state, in order to assuage those who permit man no possibility for any good unless indebted to God, that we owe our entire life work to God, without whom we could accomplish nothing; furthermore, that the free will contributes very little to an effect; finally, that it is also a work of divine grace that we can turn our heart to the things

admires. This, it seems to me, is accomplished by those who attribute everything to the pulling by grace which is the first to excite our spirit, and attribute only something to human will in its effort to continue and not withdraw from divine grace. But since all things have three parts, a beginning, a continuation and an end, grace is attributed to the two extremities, and only in continuation does the free will effect something. Two causes meet in this same work, the grace of God and the human will, grace being

the principal cause and will a secondary, since it is impotent without the principal cause, while the latter has sufficient strength by itself. Thus, while the fire burns through its natural strength, the principal cause is still God, who acts through the fire. God alone would indeed suffice, and without Him fire could not burn. Due to this combination, man must ascribe his total salvation to divine grace, since it is very little that the free will can effect, and even that comes from divine grace which has at

also under the title of their inheritance.

I will try to express in parables what we have been saying. Even the healthy eye of a man does not see in the darkness, and when it is blinded, it does not see anything in light either. Thus the will can do nothing, though free, if withdrawing from grace. But the one with good eyes can close his eyes before the light and see nothing. He can also turn his eyes away. They will not see what he could have seen. The one with blind eyes owes his gratitude in the

first place to God, and only then to the doctor. Before sinning our eyes were healthy. Sin has ruined them. Whoever sees, what can he pride himself in? He can impute to himself his cautious closing and turning away of the eyes.

Listen to another parable. A father raises his child, which is yet unable to walk, which has fallen and which exerts himself, and shows him an apple, placed in front of him. The boy likes to go and get it, but due to his weak bones would soon have fallen again, if the father had not supported

him by his hand and guided his steps. Thus the child comes, led by the father, to the apple which the father places willingly into his hand, like a reward for his walking. The child could not have raised itself without the father's help; would not have seen the apple without the father's showing; would not have stepped forward without the father's helping his weak little steps; would not have reached the apple without the father's placing it into his hand. What can the child claim for himself? Yet, he did do something,

but he must not glory in his own strength, since he owes everything to the father. Let us assume it is the same with God. What does the child do? As the boy is being helped up, he makes an effort and tries to accommodate his weak steps to the father's guidance. The father could have pulled him against his will. A childish whim could have refused the apple. The father could have given the apple without his running, but he would rather give it in this manner, because it is better for the boy. I readily admit that our

ours, unless divine goodness imputes it to us freely. Grace is effective in us not through the free will, but within free will, just as [they say] the causality of the potter is within the clay and not through it.

Whence comes then the mention of the crown and the reward? It is said that God crowns his gifts in us, and orders that his favor be our reward. Whatever he has effected in us, he gives, in order to make us worthy of partnership in his celestial kingdom. Here I don't see how they define a free will which effects

affirm absolute necessity, admit that God works in man not only the good works, but also evil ones. It seems to follow that inasmuch as man can never be the author of good works, he can also never be called the author of evil ones. This opinion seems obviously to attribute cruelty and injustice to God, something religious ears abhor vehemently. (He would no longer be God if anything vicious and imperfect were met in him). Nonetheless those holding such an implausible view have an

answer? Doubtlessly he would say: I like it this way. It suits the decoration and order of the universe. You have suffered as little injury as all the flies, gnats and other insects. Each I have fashioned to appear as a miracle for him who contemplates it. And a spider, is she not a beautiful animal, even if different from the elephant? Truly, there is a greater miracle in the spider than in the elephant. Are you not satisfied in being a perfect animal in your kind? Poison was not given to you to kill others

with, but to protect yourself and your little ones. Just as oxen have horns, lions have claws, wolves teeth, horses hoofs. Every animal has its utility. The horse bears burdens, the ox plows, the donkey and dog help at work, the sheep serves man for food and clothing, and you are needed for making medicine.

60) Further Exaggeration and Difficulties

But let us cease reasoning with those devoid of reason. We began our disputation with man,

How will we explain the question of God's justice and mercy in such cases? Shall we say with Paul: "O the depth ... " (Romans 11,33)? I think this would be better than to judge with impious rashness God's decisions, which man cannot explore. And truly, it is even more difficult to explain how God crowns his favors in some with immortal life, and punishes his misdeeds in others with eternal suffering. In order to defend such a paradox they resort to other paradoxes and to maintain the battle against their

adversary. They immensely exaggerate original sin which supposedly has corrupted even the most excellent faculties of human nature, makes man incapable of anything, save only ignoring and hating God, and not even after grace and justification by faith can he effect any work which wouldn't be sin. They make that inclination to sin in us, remaining after the sin of our first parents, an invincible sin in itself, so that not one divine precept exists which even a man justified by faith could possibly keep. All the

nature cannot bear fellowship with sin. At the same time, they say man does nothing but sin after having received grace.

Luther seems to enjoy such exaggerations. He pushes other people's exaggerations even further, driving out bad knots with worse wedges, as the saying goes. Some had daringly advanced another exaggeration, selling not only their own, but also the merits of all the saints. What kind of works [is meant]: songs, chanting the psalms, [eating of] fishes, fasting, dressing [simply],

titles? Thus Luther drove one nail through with another, when he said the saints had no merits whatsoever, and that the works of even the most pious men were sin and would adduce eternal damnation if faith and divine mercy had not come to the rescue. The other side was making a considerable profit with confession and reparation. Human conscience was thereby exceedingly entangled. Likewise, all kinds of strange things were related concerning purgatory. The opponents

[i.e. Luther] correct these mistakes by saying confession is the Devil's invention, and should not be required, and they think no satisfaction is necessary for sin, because Christ has atoned for the sin of all; and think there is no purgatory. One side goes so far as to say that the orders of any prior of a monastery are binding under pain of hell, while they have no scruples in promising eternal life to those who obey them. The opponents answer this exaggeration by saying that all the orders of popes, councils and

bishops are heretical and anti-Christian. The one side exalts papal power in an exaggerated way, the other side speaks of the pope such that I do not dare to repeat it. Again, one side says the vows of monks and priests fetter man forever under punishment of hell, the others say such vows are godless and not to be made, and once made, to be broken.

61) Differences between Exhortation and Doctrine

The whole world is now shaken by the thunder and

lightning born of the collision of such exaggerations. If both sides hold fast to their exaggeration, I foresee such a battle as between Achilles and Hector: since both were headstrong, only death could separate them. True, there is the popular saying, if you want to straighten a curved stick, bend it in the opposite direction. But this applies to the correction of morals. I do not know whether to employ it in matters of dogma.

In the case of exhortations and dissuasion I see

sometimes a place for an exaggeration. If one wishes to encourage the timid man, one would be right in exhorting: "Don't fear, God will speak and do everything in you." And in order to dampen a man's godless insolence, you might profitably say, man can do nothing but sin; and to those who demand that their dogmas be thought equal to the canonical books say that all men are liars.

When in the investigation of truth, however, axioms are propounded, I believe one must not use

paradoxes, because they are so similar to riddles. I like moderation best. Pelagius attributes much too much to the free will; Scotus attributes quite a bit. But Luther mutilates it at first by amputating its right arm. And not content with this, he has killed the freedom of the will and has removed it all together. I like the sentiments of those who attribute a little to the freedom of the will, the most, however, to grace. One must not avoid the Scylla of arrogance by going into the Charybdis of desperation and indolence.

been demonstrated, this matter is as follows: It does not promote piety to investigate this any further than must be, especially before those who are unlearned. We have proven that our opinion is more evident in scriptural testimony than the opinion of the opponents. It is a fact that Holy Scripture is in most instances either obscure and figurative, or seems, at first sight, to contradict itself. Therefore, whether we like it or not, we sometimes had to recede from the literal meaning, and had to adjust

its meaning to an interpretation. Finally, it has been plainly shown how many unreasonable, not to say absurd things follow, if we eliminate the freedom of the will. It has been made plain that the opinion, as I have been elucidating it, when accepted, does not eliminate the pious and Christian things Luther argues for—concerning the highest love of God; the rejection of exclusive faith in merits, works and our strength; the complete trust in God according to his promises. Hence, I want

the reader to consider whether he thinks it is fair to condemn the opinion offered by the Church Fathers, approved for so many centuries by so many people, and to accept some paradoxes which are at present disturbing the Christian world. If the latter are true, I admit freely to my mental sloth and inability to grasp. I know for certain that I am not resisting the truth, that I love from the bottom of my heart true evangelical liberty, and that I detest everything adverse to the Gospels. Thus I am here

not as a judge, as I said at the outset, but as a disputer. Nevertheless, I can truly affirm that I have served religiously in this debate, as was demanded once upon a time of judges trying matters of life and death. Though I am an old man, I'm neither ashamed nor irked to be taught by a younger if he teaches with evangelical gentleness more evident truths. Here some will say: Erasmus should learn about Christ and disregard human prudence. This nobody understands, unless he has the Spirit of God.

Part Two: LUTHER THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

1: INTRODUCTION

[Cf. W.A. 600-602. This is the standard reference to the Weimar edition, Weimarer Ausgabe, of Luther's works.]

To THE Venerable Master Erasmus of Rotterdam, Martin Luther wishes Grace and Peace in Christ.

[600] That I have been so long in answering your Diatribe on the free will, venerable Erasmus, has happened against the expectation of all and against my usual wont,

opinion, so contemptible and worthless that I feel great pity for you for having defiled your beautiful and skilled manner of speaking with such vile dirt. . . To those who have drunk of the teaching of the Spirit in my books, we have given in abundance and more than enough, and they easily despise your arguments. But it is not surprising that those reading without the Spirit are tossed like a reed with every wind. . . . Hence, you see, I lost all desire to answer you, not because I was busy, or because it would have been a difficult

you in this book in a happy hour and gain a dearest brother. For although you write wrongly concerning free will, I owe you no small thanks, because you have confirmed my own view. Seeing the case for free will argued with such great talents, yet leaving it worse than it was before, is an evident proof that free will is a downright lie. It is like the woman of the gospel: the more the physicians treat her case, the worse it gets. [Cf. *Luke 8, 43 and Mark 5, 26*]

Therefore I shall be even more grateful if you gain

cannot all do everything. As Paul says, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12,4). It remains, therefore, that these gifts render a mutual service. One with his gift bear the burden of the other’s lack. Thus we shall fulfill the law of Christ. [*Cf. Galatians 6, 2*]

2: REFUTATION OF ERASMUS PREFACE

[W.A. 603-639]

(Erasmus 2 & 3)

Assertions in Christianity

clear the brain and cure stupidity.]

[604] But I am the biggest fool, losing words and time on something clearer than the sun. What Christian can bear that assertions should be deprecated? That would be to deny at once all piety and religion, like asserting that piety, religion and all dogmas are nothing at all. Why do *you assert* your “dislike of assertions” and your preferring an open mind?

But you remind me, and rightly so, that you were not referring to confessing

Christ and His doctrines. And in courtesy to you, I give up the right of which I normally avail myself and refrain from judging your heart. I leave this for another time, or to other writers. In the meantime, I admonish you to correct your tongue and your pen, and to refrain henceforth from using such expressions. However upright and honest your heart may be, your words, which are the index of the heart, they say, are not so. . .

No Liberty to Be a Sceptic

when you know the contents of Scriptures being set in the clearest light. And if the words are obscure in one place, yet they are clear in another. . .

(Erasmus 5 & 6)
The Crucial Issue:
Knowing Free Will

[609]. . . You draft for us a list of those things which you consider sufficient for Christian piety. Any Jew or Gentile utterly ignorant of Christ could easily draw up the same, because you do not mention Christ in a single letter. As though you

Christianity which you describe. . . is without Christ, without the Spirit, and chillier than ice. . . You plainly assert that the will is effective in things pertaining to eternal salvation, when you speak of its striving. And again you assert that it is passive, when saying that without the mercy of God it is ineffective. But you fail to define the limits within which we should think of the will as acting and as being acted upon. Thus you keep us in ignorance as to how far the mercy of God extends, and how far our

own will extends; what man's will and God's mercy really *do* effect. That prudence of yours carries you along. You side with neither party and escape safely through Scylla and Charybdis, in order that coming into open sea, overwhelmed and confounded by the waves, you can then assert all that you now deny, and deny all that you now assert! . . .

. . . [613] It is not irreligious, curious or superfluous, but extremely wholesome and necessary for a Christian to know whether or not his will has

anything to do in matters pertaining to salvation. This, let me tell you, is the very hinge upon which our disputation turns. It is the crucial issue between you and me. It is our aim to inquire what free will can do, in what it is passive, and how it is related to the grace of God. If we know nothing of these things, we shall know nothing whatsoever of Christianity, and shall be worse off than all the heathens. Whoever does not understand this, let him confess that he is not a Christian. But he who derides and ridicules it,

Diatribes. It is then essentially necessary and wholesome for Christians to know that God foreknows nothing contingently, but that he foresees, purposes and does all things according to His immutable, eternal and infallible will. This thunderbolt throws free will flat and utterly dashes it to pieces. Those who want to assert it must either deny this thunderbolt or pretend not to see it . .

Tyranny of Laws

that Papal tyranny, which falsely terrifies and murders the souls within, and uselessly exhausts the bodies without, is to be banished forthwith. Although it binds men to confession and other burdens by external pressure, it fails to restrain their minds, which are only the more provoked into the hatred of both God and men. Such external butchery of the body is in vain. It just makes for hypocrites. So that tyrants, with such laws, are nothing but raving wolves, robbers and plunderers of souls.

left to them to bind the word of God and keep men from life and the kingdom of heaven. . . . [630] With the same prudence you advise that wrong decisions made in councils should not be openly acknowledged, lest ground for denying the authority of the fathers be thus afforded. This is indeed just what the Pope wanted you to say! And he hears it with greater pleasure than the Gospel itself. He will be most ungrateful, if he does not honor you in return with a cardinal's cap, together with all the

revenues belonging to it ... I must tell you again: men's ordinances cannot be observed together with the word of God, because the former bind consciences and the latter looses them. . . . The authority of the Fathers is therefore nothing . . . for Christ is a higher authority.

*Spontaneity of
Necessitated Acts*

[632] You say: Who will endeavor to reform his life? I answer: Nobody! No man can! God has no time for your self-reformers, for

they are hypocrites. The elect who fear God will be reformed by the Holy Spirit. The rest will perish unreformed. Note how Augustine does not say that the works of none or of all are crowned, but that the works of some are. "Therefore there will be some who reform their lives." You say, by our doctrine a floodgate of iniquity is opened. Be it so. Ungodly men are part of that evil leprosy spoken of before. Nevertheless, these are the same doctrines which throw open to the elect, who fear God, a

gateway to righteousness, an entrance into heaven, a way unto God . . . These truths are published for the sake of the elect, that they may be humbled and brought down to nothing and so be saved. The rest resist this humiliation. They condemn the teaching of self-desperation. They wish to have left a little something that they may do themselves. Secretly they continue proud, and enemies of the grace of God.

. . . [634] ... As to the other paradox you mention, that whatever is

For if it is not we ourselves, but God only, who works salvation in us, it follows that nothing we do before His working in us avails unto salvation. By necessity I do not mean compulsion. I meant what they term the necessity of immutability. That is to say, a man void of the Spirit of God does not do evil against his will, under pressure, as though taken by the neck and forced into it, . . . but he does it spontaneously and willingly. And this willingness and desire of doing evil he cannot, by his own strength, eliminate,

restrain or change. He goes on still desiring and craving to do evil. And if external pressure compels him to act outwardly to the contrary, yet the will within remains averse and chafes under such constraint. But it would not thus rise in indignation, if it were changed, and made willing to yield to a constraining power. This is what we mean by the necessity of immutability: that the will cannot change itself, nor give itself another bent, but, rather, the more it is resisted, the more it is irritated to crave, as its

something which is not free.

. . . [638] But, if we do not want to drop this term altogether (which would be the safest and most Christian thing to do), we may still use it in good faith denoting free will in respect not of what is above him, but of what is below him. This is to say, man should know in regard to his goods and possessions the right to use them, to do or to leave undone, according to his free will. Although at the same time, that same free will is overruled by the free will of God alone, just as He

3: REFUTATION OF ERASMUS' INTRODUCTION [W.A. 639-661]

(Erasmus 8)
*Denying Church Fathers'
Authority*

[639] ... At the beginning of our disputation proper you promised to argue according to the canonical books, “since Luther recognizes no [extracanoncal] authority.” [640] Very well! I welcome your promise . . . You tell us that you are much

free will, or by the power of the free will, or to confirm the free will? Far from it, you will say, but in the name and by the power of Jesus Christ were all those things done, and for the confirmation of the doctrine of Christ. . . . Wherefore your appeal to the holiness, the Spirit and the miracles of the Fathers is pointless. These do not prove the free will, but the doctrine of Jesus Christ which contradicts free will . . . [649] . . . Those who assert the free will ... in blindness and ignorance, pick that which the Fathers,

which we all hold runs thus, “I believe in the holy catholic Church” ... [651] ... Show me under the kingdom of the Pope one single bishop discharging his office. Show me a single council at which they dealt with matters of religion, and not with gowns, dignities, revenues and other profanities, which only the mad could consider pertaining to the Holy Spirit! Nevertheless they are called the Church . . . And yet even under them Christ has preserved His Church, though it is not called the church. How

of the same spirit lived in those times. Why don't you rather marvel at this, Erasmus, that in general there were, from the beginning of time, superior talents, greater learning a more ardent pursuit among pagans than among Christians and the people of God? As Christ Himself declares, "The children of this world . . . are more prudent than the children of light" (Luke 16,8) . . . [652] . . . Therefore, what shall we do? The Church is hidden, the saints are unknown. What and whom shall we believe? . . . [654] .

nothing has ever been disclosed to favor free will. I have proved that above. To teach something that is neither described by one word within Scripture, nor evinced by a single fact outside Scripture, is inappropriate for Christian doctrine, though appropriate for the very fables of Lucian. . .

Division of Luther's Work

. . . Thus I might here have concluded the whole of this free will discussion. Even the testimony of my adversaries is for me and

**4: REFUTATION OF
ERASMUS' OLD AND
NEW TESTAMENT
PROOFS SUPPORTING
THE FREE WILL
[W.A. 661-699]**

*(Erasmus 13)
Refuting Erasmus'
Definition of Free Will*

[662] Let us first of all, as is proper, begin with your definition of free will: "Under free will we understand in this connection the ability of the human will whereby man can turn toward or turn away from that which

matters very plainly. And as to those words, “which lead unto eternal salvation,” I suppose they mean the words and works of God, which are offered to the human will that it might apply itself to or turn away from them. I call both the law and the gospel the “words of God.” The law requires works, the gospel faith. There is nothing else that leads to the grace of God, or unto eternal salvation, but the word and the work of God, because grace, or the Spirit is the very life to which the words and work of God lead us.

comprehension. If it can will and not will, it can also love and hate. If it can love and hate, it can, to a degree, keep the law and believe the gospel. For it is impossible, if you can will and not will, that you should not be able by that will to begin some kind of work, even though another should hinder you from completing it. And therefore since death, the cross and all the evils of the world are numbered among the works of God that lead to salvation, the human will can will its own death and perdition. Yes, it can will all

things when it can will the contents of the words and works of God. What can there be anywhere below, above, within or without the word and work of God, but God Himself? But what is here then left to grace and the Holy Spirit? This is plainly to ascribe divinity to free will! For to will to embrace the law and the gospel, not to will sin, and to will death, belongs to the power of God alone, as Paul testifies in more places than one.

This means that no one since the Pelagians has written of free will more

other to will. The Sophists do the same. But Erasmus, setting aside the power of discernment, exalts the power of choice alone. Thus he makes a lame half free will into a god. What do you suppose he would have done, had he set out describing the whole of free will? . . . [665] Do you see, my friend Erasmus, that by this definition you betray, unwittingly, I presume, that you know nothing at all of these matters, or that you write thoughtlessly upon the subject, knowing neither what you say nor what you affirm? As I said

own judgment.

I ask you, how does your previous definition of free will square with this first opinion which you confess to be very probable? For you said that free will is a power of the human will by which a man can turn towards good, whereas here you say approvingly that man without grace cannot will good. The definition affirms what its example denies. Hence there are found in your free will a yes and a no. In one and the same doctrine and article in the same breath you approve and condemn

First then, I should demand of her how it can be proven that the free will in man is signified and implied wherever the phrase “if thou wilt,” “if thou shalt do,” “if thou shalt hear” are used. She will say, because the nature of words and the common use of language among men seem to require it. Therefore, she judges of divine things and words according to the customs and things of men. What can be more perverse than that, when the former are heavenly and the latter earthly? Thus like a fool she

exposes herself as thinking of God only as of man . . . [677] . . . Wherefore, the words of the law are spoken, not that they might assert the power of the will, but that they might illuminate the blindness of reason. Thus it may seem that its own light is nothing and the power of the will is nothing. “Through law comes the recognition of sin” says Paul (Romans 3,20).

He does not say the abolition or avoidance of sin. The whole nature and design of the law is to give knowledge, and that of

words of law man is admonished and taught what he ought to do, and not what he can do . . . [685] . . . God in his own nature and majesty is to be left alone. In this respect we have nothing to do with Him, nor does He wish us to deal with Him. We have to do with Him as far as He is clothed in and delivered to us by His word . . . God Preached deplores the death which He finds in His people, and which He desires to remove from them . . . But God Hidden in majesty neither deplores, nor takes away death, but

works life and death and all things; nor is He kept bound to His Word, but has kept Himself free over all things. The Diatribe is deceived by its own ignorance in making no distinction between God Preached and God Hidden, i.e. between the Word of God and God Himself.

. . . [692] . . . The New Testament proper consists of promises and exhortations, just as the Old Testament proper consists of laws and threats. In the New Testament the gospel is preached. This is nothing

good works, and to bear courageously the cross and all the other tribulations of this world. This is the whole sum of the New Testament. But how little Erasmus understands of this matter is manifest in not knowing how to distinguish between the Old and the New Testaments. For he sees nothing anywhere but laws and precepts by which men may be formed in good manners. But what the rebirth, renewal, regeneration and the whole work of the Spirit are, he does not see.

. . . [699] . . . And why is it necessary to review one by one all the passages cited from Paul,

[The major portion of this chapter in Luther is a detailed exegetical analysis of many scriptural passages. These have been omitted here.]

a collection only of imperative and conditional passages, in which Paul exhorts Christians to the fruits of faith? The Diatribe by its appended conclusion proceeds to envisage a free will whose power is so great

thunder and lightning of
God!

**5: COMMENTS ON
ERASMUS'
TREATMENT OF
PASSAGES DENYING
FREE WILL**
[W.A. 699-756]

(Erasmus 30)
Figures of Speech

. . . [700] ... In this part of
the discussion the Diatribe
invents a new trick of
eluding the clearest
passages, i.e., it will have it
that in the clearest and

remnant of nature in Satan and wicked man, as being the creatures and work of God, is no less subject to divine omnipotence and action than all the rest of the creatures and works of God. Since God moves and works all in all, He necessarily moves and works even in Satan and wicked man. But he works according to what they are and what He finds them to be, i.e., since they are perverted and evil, being carried along by that motion of Divine Omnipotence, they cannot but do what is perverse and

evil. Just as it is with a man riding a horse lame on one foot or on two feet. His riding corresponds to what the horse is. That is, the horse moves badly. But what can the man do? He is riding this horse together with sound horses. This one goes badly, though the rest go well. But it cannot be otherwise, unless the horse be made sound.

Here you see then that when God works in and by evil man, evil deeds result. Yet God cannot do evil Himself, for he is good. He uses evil instruments, which cannot escape the

deceived in that which he foreknows, then that which He foreknows must of necessity come to pass. Otherwise, who could believe His promises, who would fear His threatenings, if what He promised or threatened did not necessarily ensue? How could He promise or threaten, if His foreknowledge deceives Him or can be hindered by our mutability? This supremely clear light of certain truth manifestly stops all mouths, puts an end to all questions, gives forever victory over all

does not work in us without us, because He created and preserves us for the very purpose that He might work in us and we might cooperate with Him, whether that occurs outside His kingdom and under His general omnipotence, or within His kingdom and under the special power of His Spirit. So I say that man, before he is regenerated into the new creation of the Spirit's kingdom does and endeavors nothing to prepare himself, and when he is regenerated he does and endeavors nothing

toward his perseverance in that kingdom. The Spirit alone, without ourselves, works both blessings in us, regenerating us and preserving us when regenerated . . . [755] ... I will not accept or tolerate that moderate middle way which Erasmus would, with good intention, I think, recommend to me: to allow a certain little to free will, in order to remove the contradictions of Scripture and the aforementioned difficulties. The case is not bettered, nor anything gained by this middle way. Because, unless you

6: SUMMARY ON THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL

[W.A. 756-786]

[756] We are now coming to the last part of this book, in which, as I promised, I am bringing forward my own resources against free will. Not that I shall produce them all, for who could do that within the limits of this small book, when the whole Scriptures, in every letter and iota, stand on my side? There is no need, because free will lies vanquished and

They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God has set forth as a propitiation by his blood through faith, etc." (Romans 3,21-25). Here Paul utters very thunderbolts against free will. First, he says, the righteousness of God without the law is manifested. He distinguishes the righteousness of God from the righteousness of the Law, because the righteousness of faith comes by grace, without the

law. This saying, “without the law” can mean nothing else, but that Christian righteousness exists without the works of the law; the works of the law availing and effecting nothing toward its attainment. As [Paul] says further on: “For we reckon that a man is justified by faith independently of the works of the law” (Romans 3,28). And earlier he has said: “For by the works of the law no human being shall be justified” (Romans 3,20). From all this it is clearly manifest that the endeavor and effect of free

will are simply nothing. For if the righteousness of God exists without the law, and without the works of the law, how shall it not much more exist without free will? The supreme concern of free will is to exercise itself in moral righteousness, or the works of that law by which its blindness and impotency derive their assistance. But this word “without” abolishes all morally good works, all moral righteousness and all preparations for grace. Scrape together every power you can think of as

could be saved—but because, even though there were no dangers, adversities or devils, I should still be forced to labor with no guarantee of success and to beat the air only. If I lived and worked to all eternity, my conscience would never reach comfortable certainty as to how much it must do to satisfy God. Whatever work it had done, there would still remain a scrupling as to whether or not it pleased God, or whether He required something more. The experience of all who seek

certain that I please God, not by the merit of my works, but by reason of His merciful favor promised to me. So that, if I work too little or badly. He does not impute it to me, but, like a father, pardons me and makes me better. This is the glorying which all the saints have in their God!

7: CONCLUSION

[W.A. 786-787]

[786] I shall here end this book, though prepared, if necessary, to pursue this Discussion still further . . .

with the matter and understands it, does not write like that. On the contrary, in this book of mine, I have not made comparisons, but have asserted and still do assert. I wish none to become judges, but urge all men to submit!

May the Lord whose cause this is, enlighten you and make you a vessel of honor and glory. Amen.

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